

# Abstract

Title of dissertation:       INTEGRATING CLASSICAL CHINESE DANCE AND  
WESTERN CONTEMPORARY DANCE IN THE MIDST  
OF THE PANDEMIC

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*Ghost Bride* was a 40-minute original dance art presentation that premiered at the Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center at the University of Maryland on November 19 and 20, 2020. The production featured dramatic design elements and unique dance movements to convey the mystery, emotion, and supernatural events of the ancient ghost bride story. The theoretical premise and research focused primarily on philosophical and choreographic methods to effectively integrate the character of Classical Chinese female dance movements with Western contemporary movements, as a means to expand the creative boundaries for Western dancers. Other explored research interests included using the arts to drive cathartic healing from loss, and identifying creative opportunities to promote self-determination and personal freedoms for women. Planning, preparations and rehearsals occurred amidst challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic. This work was conducted to fulfill requirements for the Master of Fine Arts in Dance at the University of Maryland.

INTEGRATING CLASSICAL CHINESE DANCE AND WESTERN  
CONTEMPORARY DANCE IN THE MIDST OF THE PANDEMIC

By

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## **Dedication**

I wish to give special thanks to my Mom and Dad for their dedication and support for my study in the U.S. I dedicate this work to my Dad as my work has given me an opportunity to share the dimensional transition he might have experienced since I lost him.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

The basic elements of my thesis presentation were developed over twenty years, first in Shanxi Province, China and then later throughout my graduate work in the University of Maryland's MFA in Dance program in the School of Theatre, Dance, and Performance Studies (TDPS). My Chinese dance history was rigid, disciplined, and challenging. Stressful, but also fulfilling. I spent many years in rigorous dance training and extensive performing inside and outside China. During this time, I was subject to my country's strong historical and cultural traditions. From the time I was about 15 years old, I decided I did not want to follow some aspects of the traditional Chinese culture. I had a dream of moving to the United States, learning in a different culture, learning different dance forms, and pursuing a higher degree to become a strong and independent woman.

I moved to the U.S. in 2014 with the intention of studying the English language and continuing my education at the University of Maryland. The opportunities I've had to study and work with the TDPS dance faculty and to perform at the University of Maryland have widened my perspective as an artist. I have gained an appreciation for the artistic liberties of the U.S. and other Western nations. This new awareness has grown much more as a graduate student along with my knowledge of the history, science, and philosophy of dance.

My Chinese and American influences are dramatically different, but they are essential for making me who I am today. When I began the MFA program in Dance in 2018, I began to focus on the need to improve cross-cultural understanding, putting much thought into ways to accomplish that through teaching, choreography, and stage

direction. The driving influence for this concept was the contrast between my Chinese heritage and the Western culture that I had only recently begun to experience.

In early 2020, I began to develop a potential thesis statement to investigate the most effective methods for blending Classical Chinese dance with Western contemporary dance forms. My intention was to bring new value to Western dancers and their audiences by integrating Classical Chinese dance movements with Western contemporary dance forms. It was also my hope that this sort of venture might assist in communication between cultures.

It was, and still is, my contention that the arts can be very important in developing positive cross-cultural relationships and potentially defusing international tensions. Artistic influences frequently affect the cultures in other nations, particularly since globalization.<sup>1</sup> I researched current methods that might effectively blend these two very distinctive dance styles and put much thought into the components of Classical Chinese dance that would be most appropriate for integrating with Western contemporary dance form, and the factors that might influence this process.

I established an objective to develop a thesis performance with a dance vocabulary that integrates movements including both Classical Chinese and Western contemporary dance forms. In February 2020, I developed a plan to formulate a process, develop movements, and design choreography for the presentation of a dance performance for the stage. I considered the many features of Classical Chinese dance that would likely add to Western contemporary dance forms. Classical Chinese dance has its own unique aesthetic, created through delicate yet precise feminine movements representing images symbolic of Chinese culture such as spirals, and circles. I spent a lot

of time developing a vision of what I thought the performance should look like, and the kinds of movements that would work well together. In searching for a narrative that would present the appropriate theme to match my vision, I settled on the story of the ghost bride, a traditional story from southern Asian culture. I began to develop an initial production plan, and to recruit dancers.

Then, in early 2020, COVID-19 happened. The emergence and spread of the SARS CoV-2 virus in early 2020 drastically changed life in impacted communities, first in China, and then in other Asian and European countries, before erupting in the Americas.<sup>2</sup> Ultimately, the health threat from the pandemic and the subsequent cancellations of public events and venues would create many limitations and challenges for developing a dance production for the stage. With the support of the university and the MFA program, extremely capable design and production teams, and talented and eager dancers, I was able to continue with virtual planning and preparations, and theatrical rehearsals leading up to tech week, followed by two live-streamed performances in November 2020. The path to completion was filled with risk and required flexibility, communication and coordination, sacrifice and perseverance from all. Adjustments had to be made for socially distanced choreography, cast changes, presentation quality on monitors, and other challenges that arose. To be successful, everyone involved in the production had to exhibit an abundance of creativity, skill and determination. In the chapters that follow, I recount my process and my experience, and I examine the factors that influenced the production's outcome.

## **Chapter 2: My Early Cultural and Creative Influences**

In this chapter, I describe my early familial and cultural influences, as well as my entry into the dance arts and subsequent performing tours.

### **Familial and Cultural Influences**

I come from a small town in China. My mother was an artist and music teacher; her influence on me as a young dancer produced an environment that encouraged me to have a deep interest in the arts. In Chinese culture, children must honor their parents and the first rule of filial piety is to obey. China's measure for good children is to not go against their parents' wishes, and to not argue with them. At the same time, children are always expected to listen to their parents even when it seems they are wrong. It is precisely because of this family philosophy that I became very rebellious between the ages of 14-17, and my parents labeled me as an unfilial child. Under that traditional and conservative family education, it was very difficult for me to share my ideas with my parents. This habit resulted in me having difficulty expressing my ideas with others. As I grew up, I always chose to follow others and be silent. This habitual response made me think this is what a woman should be. For a long time, I did not know how to express my true beliefs.

Modern Chinese society is increasingly demanding on women. The old traditions must still be obeyed, but not only do women need to be good housewives, now they also need to shine in the workplace. In Mainland China, it is very difficult for single women, or women who are not married by a certain age, to explain to others that they are doing just fine. Moreover, some people regard women who bypass the mainstream tradition and

choose their own way to live to be ‘wild women’. Women who advocate feminist ideals and who have a role and responsibilities in a progressive society often have their choices and ideas questioned by family and friends who retain traditional, conservative thinking. In Chinese culture, and especially the Muslim culture in my city, women are expected to be married by the age of 25, and both work and take care of housework and children. Therefore, almost all my peers in China have married by now.

Relatives and friends commonly inquire about lifestyle choices, and it is difficult for them to understand the answers of women with modern perspectives. Women endure heavy pressure while trying to do their part to change the social mores of the old, traditional society for their own benefit and for those women who come after them. They struggle to promote a society that allows them to live the way that they want without concern over other people’s questions and opinions. Often, women’s ideas of independence and self-determination are still rejected by many males who retain chauvinistic views. As a result, many outstanding women are still single in China because it is very difficult for them to find men who can fully support feminism. These opposing concepts leave many women feeling vacant and sad and frustrated with their lives.

From my own experience, I can empathize with these problems faced by women who reject traditional ways of thinking. Until the time I left China six years ago, I thought that women were not qualified to be president because of their limited education. Women were not encouraged to study politics or other major academic subjects. If I had not had the opportunity to see more of the world and be inspired by women’s outstanding perspectives and accomplishments, I might still think that the sovereignty of the world should belong to males. My thinking has changed since, and after several years studying

abroad, I have come to understand that when a woman is strong, wise, and curious to learn, she can do anything a man can do.

The combined influences of learning and lifestyles from both China and the U.S. have benefited me so much. As a young artist, it was personally insightful to discover the important elements in my dance creation of *Ghost Bride* that are somehow deeply related to my personal experience as a Chinese woman in China, and as a Chinese woman in the U.S.

### **Creative Influences**

I am appreciative that I had my Classical Chinese dance training during my BFA study in China from 2008-201<sup>3</sup>. While I was a member of the Huajin Dance Drama Ensemble, I performed as a dancer in the production *Forbidden Fruit Under the Great Wall* and *Opera Warriors* that toured over 100 cities nationally and internationally. These two productions were commissioned by the Chinese Ministry of Culture as international cultural exchange projects. *Opera Warriors* was performed at the closing ceremony of the Australian “Year of Chinese Culture” as the first Chinese dance drama at the Sydney Opera House. While these performances were a very intense and valuable experience during my time in college, I fell behind academically due to the demands of my travel. However, the extensive performing experiences provided me with the foundation and skills to enable my direction of the *Ghost Bride* production.

I found my artistic balance during my full-time MFA student experience. When I was looking for a graduate program, there were three things that I learned about the UMD MFA Dance Program that made it so attractive. The first was the excellent faculty. Each member of the faculty has unique capabilities, and I wanted to learn and take advantage

of their knowledge and skills. The second was the program's history of producing dance concerts, and opportunities for dance MFAs to collaborate with design graduate students. I have been involved in many productions at UMD during the past three years and my collaboration experiences as both dancer and choreographer would have been unimaginable before I came to UMD. The third was my graduate student teaching assignments throughout the three years of the program. I knew that this would be the program that could provide the skills and foundation for a successful future career and help guide me to my goal of bridging the gap between cultures. So, it was no surprise that it led to my research into integrating the two dance forms, and my plan to implement what I had learned in my thesis production.

The character of the Classical Chinese female dance movements in Chinese dance and choreography was the main focus for starting my choreographic research. I am especially interested in studying this because in Chinese dance, male and female roles are separated. Even technique classes are separated into male and female classes because they are considered different disciplines. But in modern dance, there is no difference. I believe China is currently undergoing a slow transition away from gender discrimination, but there is a long way to go.

### **Chapter 3: Cultural Integration of Choreographic and Training Methods**

In this chapter, I describe the history of Classical Chinese dance and its principal elements. I also provide a foundation for the introduction of Classical Chinese dance to Western audiences, and its integration with Western contemporary dance forms.

#### **Artistic Elements of Classical Chinese Dance**

There are distinct differences between Classical Chinese dance and Western contemporary dance forms such as ballet and modern dance. Classical Chinese dance is a very systematic art form, dependent upon strengthening the fundamentals before dancers can move on to more difficult movement combinations. Classical Chinese dance pays special attention to the relationships between eyes, hands and bodies, as well as to delicate shapes, both strong and gentle. Complex hand and finger gestures are commonly used as well as hand-eye coordination not seen in Western dance; and there is frequent use of the aesthetic features of spiral and circular movements that symbolize harmony in Chinese culture, while Western contemporary dance forms are more linear and elongated. Chinese femininity and its elegant temperament are fundamental to female dance movements in Classical Chinese dance.

The dance photos below are two artistic repertoire photos of a traditional dance pose with multicolored cheongsam, a kind of long robe first wore by Manchu women, reflecting the rich traditional culture of China. In these photos, dancers show three body curves from ten shapely female bodies in unison of motion and emotion. The three body curves, presented through the head, chest and hip, are fundamental to female dance movements in Chinese dance, in demonstrating elegance and femininity, elements that



are key to the Chinese cultural arts. The three body curves will become an essential posture and movement in my choreography of my thesis presentation.



*Depictions of S Curves in Classical Chinese dance (Photo credit: He Ming)*

### **Chinese-Western Integration**

Classical Chinese dance form has a history going back sixty years and is influenced by strong cultural, social and political factors. These factors have resulted in many different traditional forms of dance. As China was a closed nation until the 1970s, Western audiences have only recently been introduced to Classical Chinese dance. It is my belief that the introduction of more Chinese dance forms or more creative integration could add to diversity to the dance styles of Western nations and improve the experience for Western audiences by adding more variety and external cultural influences.

My first introduction to Western contemporary dance forms was not smooth. I was professionally trained in the Shen Yun form of Classical Chinese dance (there are four styles: Shen Yun, Dun Huang, Han Tang, and Kun Wu). The Shen Yun form

curriculum included required classes such as techniques, bearing, and repertoire. This professional training requires flexibility, highly defined body postures, and special attention to hands and eyes. Because of that intensive training, my body was indoctrinated in very strict and disciplined movement, and therefore it was difficult for me to participate in the contemporary and modern dance classes in the U.S., as I was frustrated with my own body movements. I tried so hard to dance like a Western modern dancer and to do something that was completely not me. The modern styles demonstrated by my teachers and other graduate students had movements that were vastly different in terms of movement qualities, timing, shape, and dynamics, and the form was not constrained by the classical rules I was trained to follow. In time, I learned to love modern dance because of the freedom to dig deeper into myself. Modern dance helped me to reconnect with the spirit of dance, after years of long dance tours where I was required to conform to a standard I no longer believed in. A turning point came when I stopped trying to be a purely modern dancer and concentrated on the influence of both modern and Chinese forms. It helped me to be true to my roots but also to be who I want to be while creating my own work.

It was this transformation that awakened in me a desire to develop the relationship between Chinese and postmodern movements. Before walking into the postmodern dance classroom at UMD, I carried a question with me that would become a major research question throughout my three years of MFA study. Namely, what would be the best approach to integrate Classical Chinese dance with Western contemporary dance forms? I researched these two dance forms, both in technique and choreography.

My interpretation of modern dance is that it is a dance form personalized by physical practice; reflection on one's dance lineage; examination of body relationship to movements; possibilities of movements; and a free concept of how one moves. I carried those principles as my personal investigation into the development of my own style throughout the modern technique classes I have taken during my dance study in the U.S. As my educational experience has grown, it has become increasingly a part of me just as I still carry my Chinese dance experience. I knew I wanted to bridge the gap, to develop a hybrid of different regional styles, and to create a unique dance style.

I believe it is important to introduce female movements, elegance, and femininity from Classical Chinese dance to expand the range of Western contemporary dance forms, and to enhance the aesthetic experience for Western audiences. I also believe Westerners could be enlightened by the spiritual meaning behind the movements. Classical Chinese dance emphasizes internal feeling and breath, the physical bearing that is an internal feeling behind the movements, deeply connected to the dancer's state of mind and body. The internal feeling drives the form as there is a deeply emotional aspect to the body movement. This spirit is a quality of listening, and a sensitivity to both external and internal space.

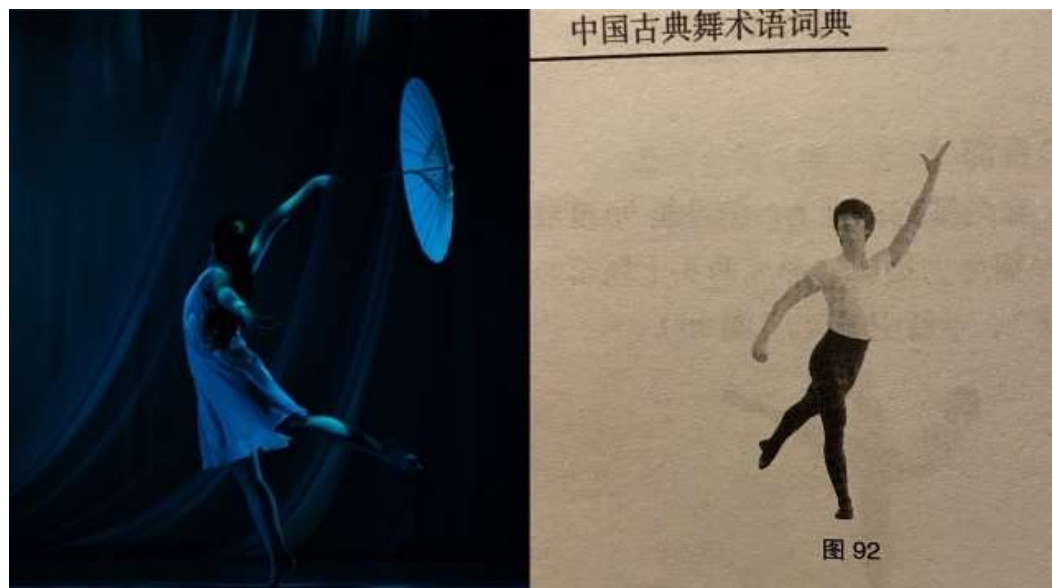
For this to be successful, I propose that there is a need to develop an effective method for sharing Chinese dance styles to enhance the value of cross-cultural exchange between Chinese and Western dancers, choreographers, and instructors.

My choreographic investigation would seek to illuminate the emotions and moods occurring in the ghost bride story and feature Classical Chinese dance techniques integrated with a Western contemporary dance sensibility. Below are several images from

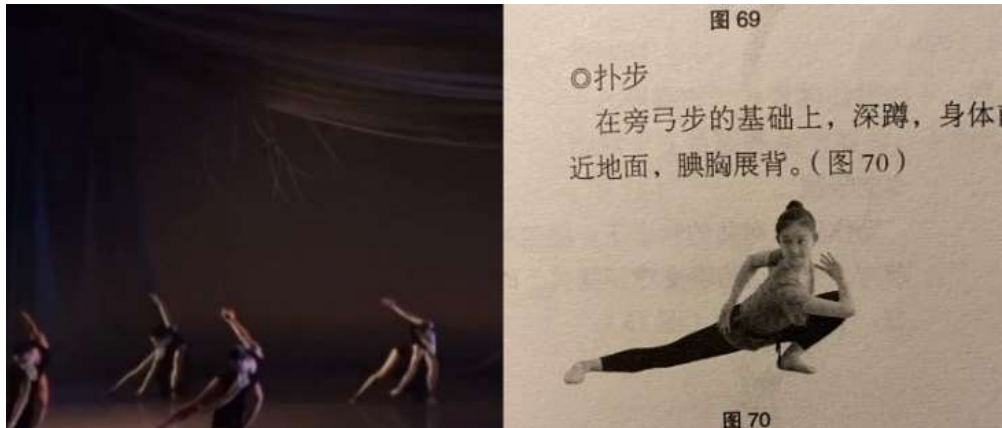
the *Ghost Bride* performance, alongside images from the *Terminology Dictionary of Chinese Classical Dance*, demonstrating how I modified the various movements for the performance.



*Modification of the Hou Tui Kong Zhi movement*  
(Photo credits: Color by Jonathan Hsu; black and white by Jin Hao)

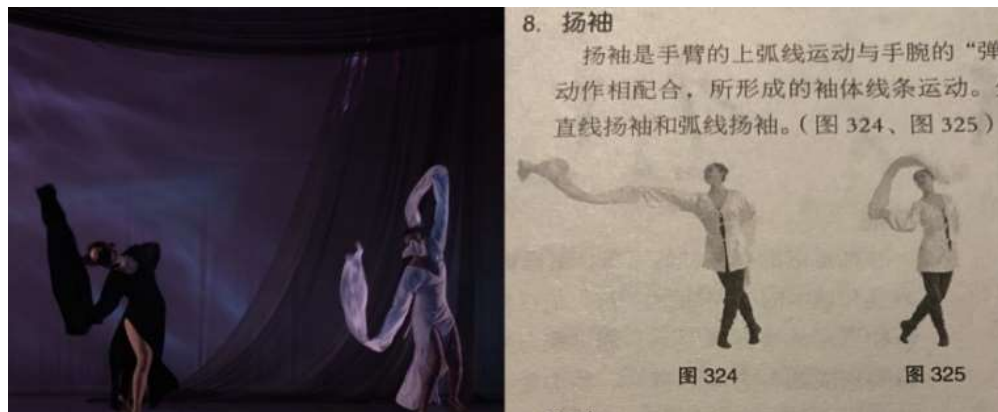


*Modification of the Ning Shen movement*  
(Photo credits: Color by Jonathan Hsu; black and white by Jin Hao)



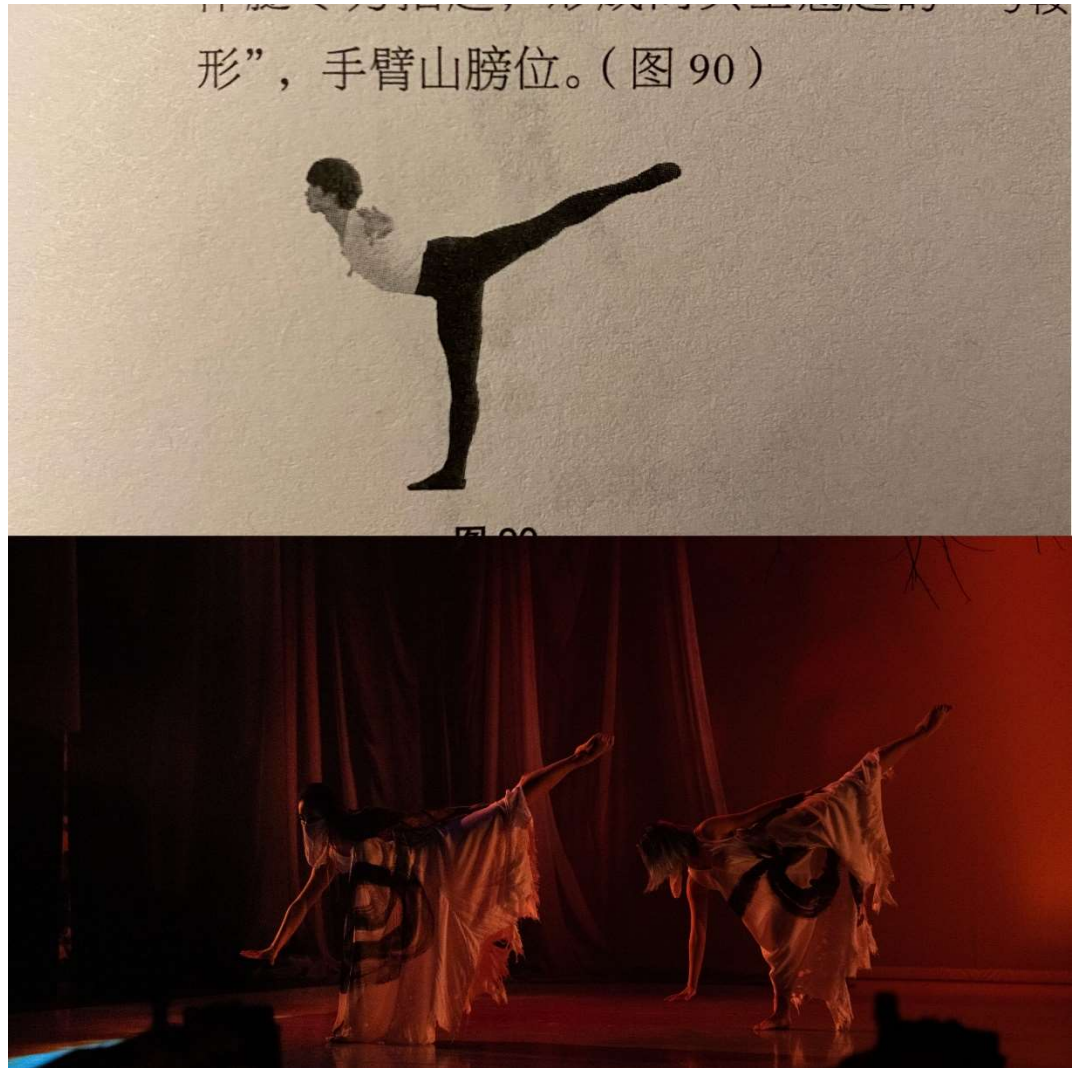
*Modification of the Pupu movement*

(Photo credits: Color by Jonathan Hsu; black and white by Jin Hao)



*Modification of the Yang Xiu movement*

(Photo credits: Color by Jonathan Hsu; black and white by Jin Hao)



*Modification of the Tan Hai movement*  
 (Photo credits: Color by Jonathan Hsu; black and white by Jin Hao)

Our future is linked to our history. Understanding historical places and events expands our appreciation and connection with the world and its people as a whole. Choreographer Yunyu Wang, who started the Cloud Gate Dance Theater in Taiwan and specializes in East-West dance, believes that “if you are to be different as a choreographer from others, you must search into your own roots”.<sup>3</sup> It is my contention that the preparations needed for Classical Chinese dance – technical skill, essential posture, form, and bearing – can have value for enhancing Western contemporary dance

training and its elements. For example, the delicate and feminine features add diversity to a Western performance.

### **Challenges to Cross-cultural Dance Integration**

Despite the opportunities for cross-cultural exchange, efforts to instruct Chinese dance aesthetics can present challenges. Successful integration of Chinese dance arts into Western theaters will likely require an understanding of the challenges, and an effective approach to overcome them. For example, certain Chinese dance movements do not translate easily to Western language. Furthermore, the strict adherence to classical movement in Chinese dance instruction could make it more difficult to merge with modern Western contemporary dance forms, which tend to be less demanding in dance fundamentals and more focused on creativity and improvisation.

Instructor Jin-Wen Yu, a full professor and Chair of the Dance Department of the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and once a soloist at the Cloud Gate Dance Theater, commented that “Westerners do not have the history or the collective memory to support that understanding. Or when you express a very elegant gesture or movement, they might feel that’s too confined, too suppressed. Or when you try to express the concept of ‘empty’ and ‘emptiness’ – those notions can be so foreign to American audiences”.<sup>4</sup> Another challenge could be the strict physical training and many years of body conditioning required for Classical Chinese dance. Each of these components of Classical Chinese dance requires a higher level of commitment to the craft than many Western dancers have experienced. Moreover, the quality of Chinese dance arts is sometimes protected due to cultural sensitivities, meaning Chinese citizens and possibly those of

Chinese descent living in Western nations may be less likely to accept outside influences or the merger of Chinese dance into other cultural dance styles.<sup>5,6</sup>

A challenge for me has been to give my own interpretation and description to the translation of words from Mandarin to English in an effective manner such that a Western reader understands without seeing a demonstration of the movement. I took a class in Laban Movement Observation and Analysis in the spring of 2020, where I learned how to create my own language to apply the materials to other movers. I realized that Classical Chinese dance movements are well described by the Laban System's symbols of movement as it serves as a bridge between Mandarin and English, and also helped me to communicate Classical Chinese dance elements to my dancers during my thesis rehearsals. For example, in the body rhythm training in Classical Chinese dance, there are many patterns of total body connectivity including core distal, body cross, breath, and head and tail movements, etc. In working with my dancers, I used patterns of total body connectivity as a tool to demonstrate movements. I wished I could be more specific about the language with each Classical Chinese dance symbolic movement. However, combining two culture-specific terms in dance movement was the most rewarding and challenging part.

I have been working on finding the best words to describe the basic technique or tenet in my early training called “气口” (Qi Kou), which every Chinese dance teacher emphasizes. After years of observing their body movements, I know how to respond to that in my own body, however, I cannot verbally describe it. In my teaching in Western culture, I thought hard about how to use the right terminology for Qi Kou. Then, I realized that Qi Kou is best called a ‘priming’ movement. It is a preparatory shift with a



subtle movement that happens before the primary movement throughout the whole choreography.

### **Approach to the Introduction of Chinese Dance Female Movements to Western Programs**

Despite the introduction of Chinese dance forms to the U.S. in the last few decades, my initial research revealed very little information about successful methods for introducing Classical Chinese dance to audiences in Western nations. Clearly this is an area that needs to be explored and is the reason for my research. It is essential to develop an approach that is consistent with both Chinese and non-Chinese dancers. Since Chinese dance instruction is very disciplined and strict, and Western contemporary dance forms allow more experimentation and freedom of style and movement, I needed to strike an appropriate balance in my pedagogic style or risk losing the essence of one or both dance styles. In addition, I needed to consider the dancers' different backgrounds, preferences and abilities to establish a foundation for instruction. I also needed to harmonize vocabulary, communication and method to create a balanced exchange of dance styles.

Other harmonizing methods needed to be developed, some specific to each dancer, but others that provided general guidance for cross-cultural dance pedagogy. My research revealed interesting approaches that I could use. One such method was to focus on the emotion, experience and/or message first. Lily Cai, owner of the Lily Cai Chinese Dance Company, who specializes in integrating Classical Chinese dance with Western ballet and modern dance, asserts that “merging cultural dance influences does not need to be a conscious act – it can and perhaps should be driven by experience and an understanding of the messages and emotions conveyed by the movement, music, staging,

lighting and special effects”.<sup>7</sup> Another of Cai’s methods was explaining to students the key aspects of Classical Chinese movements, such as the internal feeling of breath control called body rhythm training.

I agree with this observation, as there have been times when I have begun choreographing with an initial concept, but the movements, images and the emotions generated by the design effects and the dancers guided me to new creative ideas. Jin-Wen Yu described how “before starting movement, I collect the personal experiences and memories and knowledge to search for what affects and impacts me, to find out what is speaking to me at that moment. Really, they happen simultaneously, the investigation of movement and the exploration of memory”.<sup>8</sup>

In my choreography, I have leveraged the personalities and emotional states of my dancers to inform unique movements that are more meaningful for each dancer. Cai adds, “Make dance into life, life into dance” and “Every dance has its personality and face – its own deep meaning, with something that belongs to that dance alone.” This approach is based on the emotion, experience or message driving the dance and therefore overcoming cultural division. Both Cai and Yu describe a pedagogic approach that does not ignore tradition, but starts first with interpretations of memory, personality and psyche and then inserts the specific cultural influences where appropriate.

Renowned dance instructor and choreographer Nai Ni Chen writes that the Martha Graham technique of using contraction and release displays similarities between Western and Eastern dance.<sup>9</sup> These elements are related to body rhythm in Chinese dance so this could make it easier for dancers trained in the Martha Graham technique to adopt Classical Chinese dance movements. Each of these recommendations resonated with me

and I applied them to my pedagogic approach from the beginning of my production. As a result of these influences and my academic experience in the MFA Dance Program, I feel empowered to expand my cross-cultural dance integration, to express more boldly, and to experiment more personally. I believe I am mature enough to take risks and to have my work judged, in both the West and the East.

## Chapter 4: The Ghost Bride Story

In this chapter, I describe the ghost bride story and its relevance to the message I wished to convey to my audience. I also describe the story's relevance to challenges in my personal life.

I am inspired by the beauty around me – an image, a moment, a story, or a piece of music – and especially stories and events that are deeply personal. Several years ago, I was introduced to the book *Ghost Bride*, by Yangsze Choo, which tells a traditional Asian folk story that has the elements of love, sacrifice, destiny and the afterlife. I was intrigued by its beautiful language inspired by tales found in the *Liaozhai Zhiyi*, a classic collection of Chinese supernatural tales from the Qing Dynasty.<sup>10</sup> Through the story of a girl from southeast Asia, the conception of the afterlife is presented, as well as its continued importance for the surviving family. In certain Southeast Asian cultures, when a man dies young, his family often recruits a young woman to marry him in spirit. The family does this to elevate the status of the deceased son's mother and comfort the deceased son's spirit, which would be restless without a bride. It is also believed that the restless soul could cause unfortunate events for the family. The ghost bride is often pressured by her own family to accept the marriage for financial gain and, when she does so, she sacrifices her freedom and an opportunity for a normal life.

As written, it is mostly a tragic story. It dramatically presents the traditional predicament of women expected to obey their parents even if this means sacrificing their own lives. This story resonates with the situations many women in different cultures face when they are pressured by others and have no freedom of choice.

While reading *Ghost Bride*, so many images passed through my mind. I experienced a personal connection to this story, especially the feeling of helplessness. I have encountered pressures from my own Chinese family and local culture to follow a traditional path. My beliefs about some Chinese traditions evolved after my relocation to the United States, where I have been affected by the experience of a divorced female friend from Saudi Arabia who faces pressure to remarry.

On a deeper level, the story, which involves different dimensions and mysterious threads to the afterlife, inspired me to explore the connection between my father and me. I lost him in 2019 during my graduate school study. He had been ill for a while and was hospitalized in China. He died before I could get home to see him. I carried great sadness and guilt for some time. Working through this production presented an opportunity for catharsis and hopefully my acceptance of my inability to see my father before his passing.

In the original tale of the ghost bride, the ending is tragic. My dance concept and choreography reflect the themes of the ancient Asian tradition of a ghost bride but, because of my personal growth and my desire to resonate with Western audiences, I have chosen to modify the story. I wanted to use the story as a means to convey a feeling of hope. Freedom of will is more consistent with Western culture and worldwide campaigns for women's rights than Eastern culture. *Ghost Bride* presented an opportunity to shine light on the inspiration of women fighting for their right to self-determination and personal freedoms. In my story, the ghost bride recruit chooses freedom instead of marriage to the spirit of a dead man.

## **Chapter 5: Dance Production Planning During COVID-19**

In this chapter, I describe my decision processes for a theatrical performance, and my initial production plan and schedule during the increasing number of COVID-19 cases. I also describe the required safety considerations that needed to be interwoven into our daily planning and preparations.

### **Covid-19 Planning and production considerations**

Within a few months of the first case of COVID-19 in the U.S., most government departments, businesses and schools ceased to operate from their regular facilities. Because of the high infectivity of the virus including the risk of transmission from those with asymptomatic infection, people were forced to adopt new habits including prolonged self-isolation and social distancing. As a result, activities featuring close person-to-person interaction such as sporting events, concerts, and theatrical presentations were considered unsafe and were cancelled.

The dance communities within universities faced the same risks and redesigned their courses to be conducted virtually. This presented a dilemma for graduate programs, such as the University of Maryland's Dance MFA program, which generally require graduate students to develop a thesis dance concert that involves live performance with a live audience. The options were to plan an entirely virtual dance presentation with no face-to-face interaction, or to develop, rehearse, and present a dance performance in a theater under strict social distancing requirements. Of course, the latter option could expose participants to infection. As COVID-19 case numbers rose, the theatrical performance option seemed like a quickly diminishing proposition.

Virtual dance performances clearly eliminated the safety risk to all involved but, in my view, severely limited the artistic options for the director and choreographer, and also likely reduced the appeal to an online audience. It is very difficult, if not impossible, to generate the same aesthetic experience from a virtual performance as from a live show. There would be no opportunity to watch multiple performers in the same space; the special effects of lighting, projection and staging would not exist. All multi-dancer choreography conducted virtually would occur in a matrix of different environments and conditions, and dancers would not be able to use each other's cues to present movement. It is likely there could have been some creative ways to add to the virtual performance to improve its visual impact, but to my mind, it would have been very difficult to approach the value of a dance production on a stage.

While the pandemic dilemma presented numerous adjustments that were far from ideal, it also appeared to be an opportunity to pursue a kind of collaborative project that was entirely new. I wondered whether it was possible to adhere to all social distancing and other safety precautions and still effectively plan, develop, rehearse and present a full theatrical dance performance. As cases of infection continued to climb, I fluctuated in my thinking multiple times, not knowing what to expect in the coming months. The virtual option was safer, easier, and seemed to be the most practical option since COVID-19 information and policy was continuously changing.

A theatrical performance would be much more complicated, certainly riskier. It would require a high degree of confidence and maybe even courage to engage a dance team and a design crew as well as continuous reinforcement of the value of the project and the safety plan to keep everyone on board.

The question for me became whether a dance performance in the midst of COVID-19 could be planned, rehearsed and presented as a live performance in a theater in a manner that did not significantly raise the risk of infection to all involved, including designers, managers, dancers, and stage crew. This became a compelling question and after much contemplation and discussion with my committee and my colleagues, I decided to shift my attention to developing my thesis performance as a live theatrical event.

After making this decision, I spent a great deal of time considering all the factors that would need to be different from producing a dance performance in the usual environment. It would be necessary to anticipate the differences as much as possible at the outset to obtain a reasonable level of confidence of success. I would be asking a cast of 10-12 dancers and designers to work extensively, perhaps as much as 200-400 hours of each person's time, to complete the project. As I engaged in the initial planning, I was overwhelmed by the eagerness of fellow artists to join in and by their determination to make it work.

Failure to plan properly would have taken unfair advantage of everyone's time and efforts. COVID-19 presented many new challenges and much could have gone awry. I needed to develop my concept and construct my production plan carefully, and then review the plan continuously throughout the process to offer the best chance of success. Increasing cases of infection followed by more stringent protection orders from local governments created apprehension for all involved. I needed to show consistent leadership and regularly communicate my vision to the dancers, designers and production



staff, and ask for their dedication in providing a strong effort toward synergy. I also needed to allow them space to create within the realm of my vision.

As I developed an initial concept and early planning processes, several other factors emerged that were to influence a suitable approach going forward. The novelty of the virus and a lack of definitive information led to inconsistent guidance from the government on safety precautions. When the University of Maryland terminated on-campus classes, it created an exodus out of College Park. As the summer approached, it was clear the virus was not going to diminish, and we were told to anticipate an even worse situation in the fall.

One of our biggest ongoing challenges was that as in-person classes had been cancelled, a safety policy from the university had not been produced. Since we were planning an event that would eventually bring performers, designers and production crew to campus, we needed to evaluate how we could perform all the necessary functions in a safe manner. Without a university policy and safety plan, we needed to develop our own plan that would comply with guidelines from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Having this plan early on would enable us to make the best determination on whether a live on-stage performance could be achieved safely for all involved.

Also, because we were planning and developing from spring and early summer 2020 when the cases were peaking, we had no assurance of whether the university would even permit an onsite performance. My production depended upon a policy from the university permitting on-site activities. Without one, my dancers and my production team acted on faith alone until August 20, 2020, when the Director of the UMD's Graduate Studies in the School of Theatre, Dance, and Performance Studies informed me that the

performing arts fell under “extended research opportunities” and would be permitted.<sup>11</sup>

The project also benefited from the continuous support of the TDPS production team, which provided invaluable expertise and guidance. Fortunately, in August 2020, cases of COVID-19 began to drop slightly at the same time that we needed to access the theater for rehearsals. By the end of August, we finally had guaranteed access to campus facilities, which gave us a heightened feeling of optimism and exuberance.

As we returned to the facility for rehearsals and meetings, we also needed to re-evaluate our own level of risk. At one point, the university brought some graduate level courses back to campus, thus significantly increasing the student density and the risk of exposure. Then in the early fall, as the cases of COVID-19 were rising again, I needed to carefully monitor the situation for risk as well as any changes in policy issued by the state, county and university. Before we returned to campus, everyone was required to be tested with a negative result. However, there was no requirement for repeated testing and there may have been an underlying concern about exposure despite our efforts. However, all participants displayed complete dedication at all times and no such concern was ever expressed.

My team and I needed to monitor all these factors and others as we moved through the early processes. I continued with my original objective to incorporate methods for cross-cultural dance movement but it could no longer be my only focus. The challenges of COVID-19, the worst pandemic in 100 years, were considerable and required continuous attention to keep the process on track.

## **Virtual Preparations**

While it is certainly true that in person meetings would have been preferred, my weekly virtual sessions with both my designers and dancers were very effective for developing and communicating ideas and prototypical designs.

The pandemic's impact of forcing social distancing meant flexibility would be needed in working with the entire design and production team to prepare mostly virtually throughout the spring and summer. This was the greatest change from a conventional theatrical production, as my team and I needed to complete as much of the preparation virtually as possible. Clearly, seeing fabric on a screen instead of feeling it, or hearing music online instead of in a theater was not the same. These limits were only somewhat overcome when returning to the theater. For example, as the director, I was only allowed to feel the fabric of my own costume and not that of the other dancers.

Beginning on March 25, all dance rehearsals shifted to weekly Zoom lessons. While it was challenging to properly facilitate meetings, demonstrate movement, and maintain a high energy level to engage everyone on the screen mentally at all times, I never observed a significant drop-off in commitment or productivity.

## **Safety Plan**

We could not begin planning for in-person theater rehearsals without a safety plan for all dancers, designers and production staff. Since the majority of university activity was in lockdown during these early months, UMD had not produced a campus safety protocol. During this early phase, I conducted research on the risk factors associated with the virus, including virus transmission from person to person, and from objects and surfaces, through available online resources from the Centers for Disease Control and

Prevention.<sup>12</sup> We developed our own safety plan to prepare as many of the artistic elements as possible in a virtual environment. After moving into the theater, all on- and off-stage preparation and rehearsal activities were carefully organized, social distancing rules were put in place, and Personal Protective Equipment was required.

After the university circulated its own safety plan in September 2020, we ensured that our guidance was consistent with UMD. In consultation with the production manager and faculty, clear rules were established for safety in the theater facility, including for entering the facility and moving throughout the staging and back-staging areas. Before we moved to rehearsals in the theater, a production manager installed appropriate signage and directional markings to ensure that artists did not cross paths, and stage props were frequently sanitized and limited to one person's use. Elements of our theater safety plan included the following:

- Dancers, designers and production crew communicated regularly with the Assistant Stage Manager who was responsible for theater safety to ensure consistent compliance with directions for safety requirements.
- All participants followed safety protocols at all times while in the theater facility including social distancing and the use of masks.
- Masks were worn by dancers while rehearsing and performing on the stage.
- The theater, dressing area and staging areas were sanitized each day.
- Directional signs for all informal movement were installed throughout the theater and backstage during rehearsals to avoid face-to-face encounters.
- The floor was taped to mark social distancing for all participants including the backstage dressing area.

- Breaks for dancers were held outside the building.
- The Stage Manager controlled the handling of props so that each dancer carried only her own props.
- Costume fittings were managed to prevent cross-contamination. The costume shop managed and tracked the delivery and retrieval of costumes as well as their sanitization after each use. Each costume was assigned to a single person.
- Designers and production staff attending rehearsals socially distanced and wore masks at all times.
- Time spent with dancers and crew in the same space was minimized as we planned to do as much as we could possibly do virtually.
- The two performances were to be live-streamed with no live audiences in the theater.

During tech week, the above guidelines were reinforced both verbally in person as well as through regular written reminders sent through emails to the entire production and performance team. I frequently reinforced the requirements of this safety plan among dancers, designers and crew both at the theater and elsewhere. Below is an image of designers and technicians social distancing during tech week.



*Social distancing during tech week* (photo credit: Rose Xinran Qi)

There were other concerns during the planning and preparations, since the entire production could have been shut down by one positive case of COVID-19. I also requested that everyone involved limit their social contacts and refrain from public gatherings. However, each participant in the project had their own lives and all I could do was hope everyone followed all safety precautions.

## **Chapter 6: My Creative Process**

In this chapter, I describe the influences that guided the development of my creative plan and how it was integrated into my production process. I also describe the various Classical Chinese dance forms that were interwoven with Western modern movements.

### **Concept, Creative Approach and Production Plan**

This entire process for me was about merging two cultures and finding my own roots as a dancer, as a choreographer, and as a performer. I knew I needed a great stage concept, something interesting and conducive to an exciting visual production. Due to the many challenges we faced, the production needed to resonate with the invited dancers and production artists, and hold their dedication throughout the entire process. I also wanted to choose a story that would align with the current mood during the pandemic. I could not envision a bright extravaganza, especially since I knew there could be no live audience except for the cast and crew. The performance needed to play well on a screen since the audience would be streaming the event into their homes. Finally, I hoped for a story that was relevant today, especially if it promoted the voices of women.

The story of the ghost bride fulfilled all those requirements. It offered a range of emotions including sadness, desperation, fear and longing. It presented an opportunity for me to explore ways of integrating Classical Chinese dance and Western modern dance, as well as to create possibilities for scenic, sound, costumes, lighting and projection designers to illuminate the mystery and power inherent in the story. I wanted to create and deliver artwork on stage that appeared to have a Chinese element but with something

more, combining movements with different dance forms. The more I envisioned the story on a stage, the more I knew this would be the one.

I developed a production plan that was divided into two major sections based on the need to comply with safety requirements for COVID-19. The first section listed all preparations that could be conducted virtually without any loss of the performance value, including:

- Further developing the concept and story in context with the overall production; collecting image research; and producing a synopsis of the plot
- Developing and describing movements
- Developing a storyboard to document the full scope of the dance
- Selecting dancers
- Pitching the production concept by PowerPoint to the Design and Production Team
- Identifying the technology: lighting, projection, sound, staging, cameras
- Developing a safety plan
- Creating initial choreography according to social distancing requirements at all times on stage and backstage
- Scheduling regular conferences with designers to discuss concepts and options for lighting, projection, sound, staging, costumes, etc. to work through an artistic process
- Presenting early virtual dance movement instruction to dancers – once per week over six weeks



- Phase two would be in-theater preparations comprised of theatrical rehearsals and tech week.

I would take my time with the process. I did not dwell on getting it done. I wanted to let the *Ghost Bride* production become the best it could possibly be.

### **Elements Throughout the Creative Process**

In Classical Chinese dance, the shape, dynamic qualities, breath, and timing of dance movements are all very prominent features related to a concept of circular thinking that affects the entire Chinese traditional culture. There are three main types of circles in Chinese classical dance: Ping Yuan, Li Yuan, and Ba Zi Yuan. In English, these circles might be called a horizontal circle, a vertical circle, and an infinity circle respectively. For example, Ba Zi Yuan “八字圆” may be referred to as an infinity circle as the movement is driven by the middle section of the body to form a shape resembling a sideways number 8 with the ribs and arms alternating on both sides.

The image of the pathway during my choreographic process and practice is influenced by these three cycle themes. I have practiced this specific technique throughout my college classes. In the *Facing the Nether World* section of *Ghost Bride*, I used the three types of circles as tools to choreograph the whole piece as they can be used for parallel, vertical, and oblique angles. I further identified the application of each circle as one of two types: internal and external.

Interestingly, I discovered old elements of my training that applied to my work that I did not deeply understand at the beginning of my dance research. These training elements became very important in the later phases of my thesis choreography and my

embodied research, and I began to apply them in our classroom practice as well. At the same time, they are also reflected in greater detail in my work.

Rhythm is made of tempo, count, and beat, but I think it is definitely more than that. Rhythm is very distinctive in Classical Chinese musicality and dance. With the strong influence of the dance arts as a young girl, I was so used to dancing every movement to the “right beat”. I found the right beat to me is the right Qi Kou”. During my thesis movement research, the Qi Kou can reside in me in various ways such as visual, kinesthetic, meditative, emotional, or imaginative.

I feel that throughout my early dance training, most of my former teachers thought that musicality is determined by metered time in dance practice. Dancing on the correct count was difficult for me. After six years of training in the U.S., I am interested in dancing with the inner rhythm of my breath more than the formed action on the “right beat”. I practice the sense of time in my dancing that resonates with me the most.

During my choreographic research, the pressures of the looming concert deadline resulted in me losing the connection to my own sense of embodiment, of my own “Qi Kou”. I lost the essence of my own choreography. For a time, I could not express through my own body movement that which I had planned to explore. For example, I was creating choreography that paid special attention to the role of the eyes in the performance, emphasizing the sense of breathing, rhythm and styling.

After coming back to work in the studio with dancers, I was so rushed to finalize the choreography that I lost my relationship to my initial vision and process. I could not be sure how to reconnect with it, and hoped I would soon feel “right” again as the performance dates were drawing near. I thought hard to find a way to feel good about my

own creative process in working on my thesis; I tried hard to find the right way to work more efficiently and restore the accent of the movements that I had discovered earlier.

This was my greatest challenge, but also the most fulfilling aspect of my work.

I developed an initial draft of my dance plan. Following completion of my research, I needed to revise the order, duration and number of performers in several of the acts, partly directed by suggestions from my committee and partly as the result of limitations due to the pandemic.

Final Dance Plan – Presentation Sections: Eight sections of music. The show included four solos, four group dances, and one duet.

1 *The decision* (group dance)

2 *Memorial for the Deceased One* (group dance)

3 *The Hell (solo)* and *Go Through That Door* (group dance)

4 *Facing the Nether World* (duet)

5 *I Saw Him* (solo)

6 *Still here, but not here* (solo)

7 *Sensual Spirits* (group dance)

8 *Veiled Ambition* (solo)

### **Choreography**

My interest in the choreography began very early in the process, even before I had selected all the dancers and established the production team. I had many creative ideas regarding choreographed movements for the various parts of the narrative. During the first few months of rehearsal, I created partnering choreography and the dancers worked intensely on developing partnering movements but as COVID-19 cases increased, the

safety risk impacted how the dance production would be choreographed. I needed to abide by social distancing requirements when we returned to the theater, and therefore, I needed to choreograph the entire production in a manner that complied with social distancing guidance at all times. This meant all partnering movements were thrown out and I needed to plan for movements that spread the dancers across the stage as much as possible.

This presented a great challenge to design choreography that told the story and had visual appeal, but that still protected the dancers. I would need to rely more on the aesthetics of scene and sound design in portraying the emotions on the stage. It also put more responsibility on each dancer to present emotion through their movements, which required much more subtle and refined technique than without the need to social distance. Interestingly, the socially distanced dancing seems to align more closely with the story's theme than partner dancing. Ultimately, although we are near others, we are still alone and distant much of the time, much like the ghost bride must have felt out of touch with reality and apart from the living.

My choreographic approach was to present the story as if in a dream in the present time. The dance movements were a mixture of Classical Chinese dance and Western contemporary dance movements. The interactions between the female bodies were extremely important since an essential component of the story is the relationship between the deceased man's mother and the ghost bride. I wanted to ensure that the performers had an understanding of historical influences on Classical Chinese dance and the spiritual and cultural meaning of the dance movements. This was to help the dancers

translate the roles and emotions behind the dance movement in their facial expressions, body postures, and energy level.

I also demonstrated the essential posture of Classical Chinese dance and the differences of postures in both female and male bodies. Then, most importantly, I needed to discover phrases that employ the body rhythm which is about the inner feeling and breath behind the movement. It plays a significant role both in Chinese dance and my own choreography since it is deeply connected to the dancer's breathing and state of mind, and uniquely reflects a dancer's personality in dance movements. I needed to make sure I created movements that mixed Classical Chinese dance with Western modern dance but were still culturally accurate and not culturally offensive. During choreographic research for *Ghost Bride*, I examined the common use of the three body curves, modifying them with my own interpretation of mixing the curves with Western contemporary dance forms.

My cast consisted of six dancers including myself: three undergraduate dancers trained in ballet, and one in contemporary, and a graduate dance student trained in ballet and modern. Prior to the working process in the studio, some of the dancers had the advantage of experience with Classical Chinese dance technique and some did not. The most difficult aspect to communicate was the concept of body rhythm, an important form of Classical Chinese dance that emphasizes the sense of breathing, timing and styling. During the rehearsals, my dancers had varying levels of difficulty adapting to the new ways of moving.

Inspired by Chinese concepts of circularity, my choreography explored round and continuous movements, without pauses, as well as classical elements of breathing, inner

emotions, and exaggerated performative facial expression. I spent considerable time training my dancers on breath control with movements. I found the rhythm of the movements by the quality of inhalation and exhalation. Once dancers became used to this new technique of dancing, it was easy for them to stay in unison during group work without counting. Moreover, I left room for my dancers to examine the hybrid dance movements on their own. It was so rewarding to see all the possibilities of how their unique bodies became enlivened by the combination of improvised dance forms.

I used different elements to apply different themes to different sections of *Ghost Bride*. Growing up in a small city in China, I had been influenced by the superstition of Chinese traditional culture since I was a child. In my perception, ghosts convey a sense of instability and loss of control. There are two sections about ghosts in *Ghost Bride*. One is called *Go Through That Door*, which is about poor souls getting ready to go through the door of hell, where the choreography portrays fear and helplessness. Another section called *I Saw Him* is about a dream with four shadows of ghosts haunting the dreamer. In creating these two sections, I used my own impression of ghosts that are not hideous but may actually be beautiful and vulnerable. This is why there are sections of *Ghost Bride* with the dancers' hair down and in costumes that are shabby. By using hair as a kinetic partner in the piece, it presented more of a wild, untamed or boundless image that was consistent with the striking and sometimes violent scenes in the production and aided the dancers' body investigation processes of the movements. Due to the Covid-19 situation, we were not able to have any paired choreography, but we somehow felt dancing with unbound hair around the shoulders and spine could be sort of a prop and provide an opportunity to communicate better with our dance movements. It was not easy during the

early attempts at dancing with our hair down and flowing, as hair covering our faces, combined with wearing masks, made it difficult to see. Therefore, for most of the rehearsals, we had our hair down to become accustomed to it.

From the beginning of our planning and throughout the rehearsals, I encouraged my dancers and design team to offer their own artistic input. I provided my solo dancer an opportunity to collaborate with me on the concept of her role as she explored her character's dance vocabulary and emotional motivation, manifested through the movement of her extravagant costume and mask design. This concept provided an opportunity to employ 'groundedness', a technique I learned from modern dance, which is the relationship of physical movement to gravity. I combined this with a personalized physical practice for each dancer in self-awareness and the freedom to find their own unique voice in the choreography. As another example of personal freedom, one dancer dyed her hair blue during training. Although I was trained in a company that required strict compliance with rules for dancers' appearance, I wanted the dancers to seek ways to enhance their personal creativity.

In the atmosphere of the final dance scene, with the remarkable display of the dancers in vivid lighting, projection and costume design, I saw the female ghost I wanted to see.

### **Late Section Changes**

Receiving feedback from my committee was an enjoyable and valuable experience. Throughout the intensive rehearsals, I had three opportunities to meet with my committee members as well as two other professors to gauge their impressions. Every discussion helped a great deal in moving my choreographic plan forward toward tech

week. On one occasion, I was influenced by my committee members to make a significant change to the order of my dance list – to shift my solo piece to the end and combine two group dances. This required changes to the music and was very challenging for the dancers, since they now needed to change hairstyles as well as costumes between the dances. However, I adjusted the timing and movements, and added a new section. Overall, it was such a great moment to challenge myself to make the changes work. It was so helpful to have frequent opportunities for feedback from my committee members and other professors because they were always insightful and inspiring discussions.



## **Chapter 7: Design Team Collaboration**

In this chapter, I describe my planning and collaboration process with my design team. I also describe the special relationship that developed among all designers and dancers that was essential for the success of the project.

### **Pitch to the Design Team**

My first task was to present the concept to the four graduate students in lighting, costume, scenic and projection design assigned to my thesis project, and try to intrigue them with the possibilities. I was fortunate to have a very creative team who recognized the value of my vision and were consistently engaged from the first production meeting to the final bows. Commitment, timely communication, and enthusiastic engagement would be paramount, since all early planning would be by videoconferencing and designers would need to do their best to represent their art only through computer images.

### **Planning Rhythm**

Soon after I was introduced to my production team, we had an in-person meeting to discuss the concept followed by three additional in-person meetings. After COVID-19 erupted, and face-to-face meetings were disallowed, I established a weekly schedule of Zoom videoconferences to plan all components of the production. I worked with each artist independently on each component – costumes, staging, lighting, projection and sound, and then held joint weekly videoconferences with the entire team so that everyone could see how the other parts of the project were developing and relating to each other.

The response from the team was exceptional; they displayed a positive attitude right from the beginning. We quickly fell into a creative rhythm and each successive meeting included new design presentations in response to my concept. The virtual

meetings began in early April and lasted until late October, with designers making steady progress toward the final product, and aligning their individual presentations to an increasingly finite point of clarity in audio and visual presentation. Work proceeded independently, but with my regular review and approval. The virtual and independent work done by all team members effectively prepared everyone involved to make the most of tech week and to maximize the performance impact of their respective contributions.

### **Rehearsals and Performances: Safety Requirements**

Upon finally returning to the theater in September, everyone working on the production seemed energized. It was great to be working in person again despite the many social distancing requirements, and I was finally able to observe all the elements in three dimensions. In the first month, I worked with my dancers in a rehearsal room without any production effects. The rest of the production team was busy developing sets and experimenting with lighting and creating costumes.

One of my first requirements after restoring theater operations was to effectively coordinate compliance with an assistant production manager who served as Safety Officer. We needed to show flexibility and creativity in developing solutions for movements in rehearsals and performances so that they did not conflict with safety policy. The photo below shows social distancing during a production meeting in the theater.



*Social distancing in a production meeting during Tech Week (Photo: Rose Qi Xinran)*

Planning for each of these components would need to take into account any necessary adjustments for a virtual presentation – in particular, how the images and sound would play on computer monitors. For example, the lighting designer consulted with a mentor on lighting for film and television, and then experimented first in the light lab, and then throughout the tech week process.

I had the first opportunity to view my dance choreography with design components and initial costume concepts on November 12, 2020. All design components needed to be cognizant of COVID-19 safety restrictions for social distancing and sanitization. The message needed to be conveyed by the stage manager that all scenery must be out of range of touching (i.e. hanging high from the above the stage) or presented only by projection. For example, I needed a ‘door to hell’ for the dancers to pass through which was created and presented entirely with projection.

## Stage to Monitor Presentation

Since there would be no theater audience other than the production team and our primary audience would be watching on their own screens, I needed to always be aware of how everything would play onscreen. Upon returning to the theater for rehearsals, I quickly realized the differences in the images from the live observation of stage action compared to the images on the theater monitor. As I watched both the stage action and the theater monitor at the same time, specific elements had a range of variation. The biggest challenge was with lighting colors. In a particular section, the stage lighting was warm with brown and deep red colors but the theater monitor showed a cold image of blue. As shown in the photo below, there were problems with the lighting balance and the camera position and shooting angles.

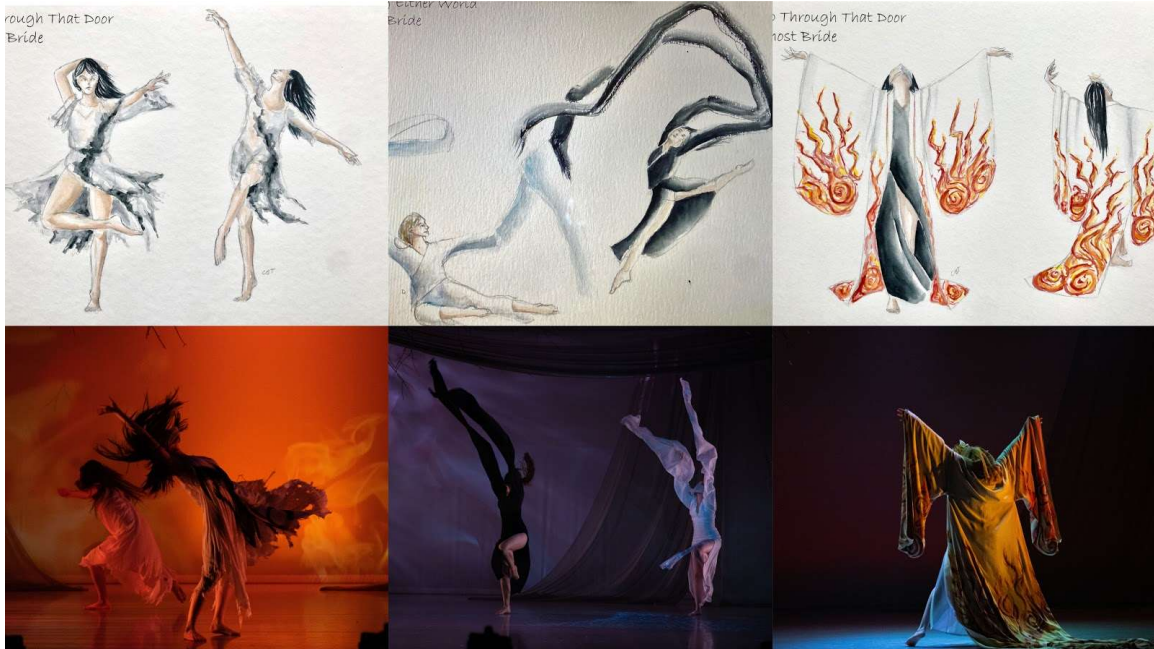


*Comparison of Lighting and Projection Effects on the stage and on the monitor (Photo: Rose Qi Xinran)*

As no one on the team had ever developed a production for the screen instead of the stage, we were thrown into a situation where we would need to learn quickly by trial and error. Because my lighting designer and I watched the action on the monitor as it happened on the stage, we could make adjustments to correct these problems.

While these modifications made a major difference in the video presentation on the theater's monitor, the lighting on my home computer still differed somewhat – which made us realize we could not account for individual viewers' hardware.

My costume designer, who came into the project with an understanding of Asian costume design, collaborated with me in researching ideas and images. From her first draft painting to the final presentation, we constantly consulted about each costume design and made revisions until the week before the performances. It was a very efficient process since we were of the same mind. The resulting performance costumes were an outstanding match to the designer's original drawings as seen in the photos below. My costume designer's advisor, who happens to be Chinese, introduced me to the book *Ghost Bride* and assisted our research on this collaboration. I was fortunate to have a collaborative experience to create with research partners who have similar interests.



*Comparison of costume images in the early working process to the final performance (drawings: by Channing Tucker. Presentation costume photos: by Jonathan Hsu)*

However, we experienced a few unexpected problems with several of the costumes, all of them easily rectified by the costume design team prior to the performances. On one costume, the designer had cut jagged edges on the hem of the costume for effect which showed well on the stage but did not come across on the screen. This merely required larger cuts. Another costume was modified during tech week to make it more flowing in order to enhance the visual on the screen, and a third costume was completely replaced for a better design.

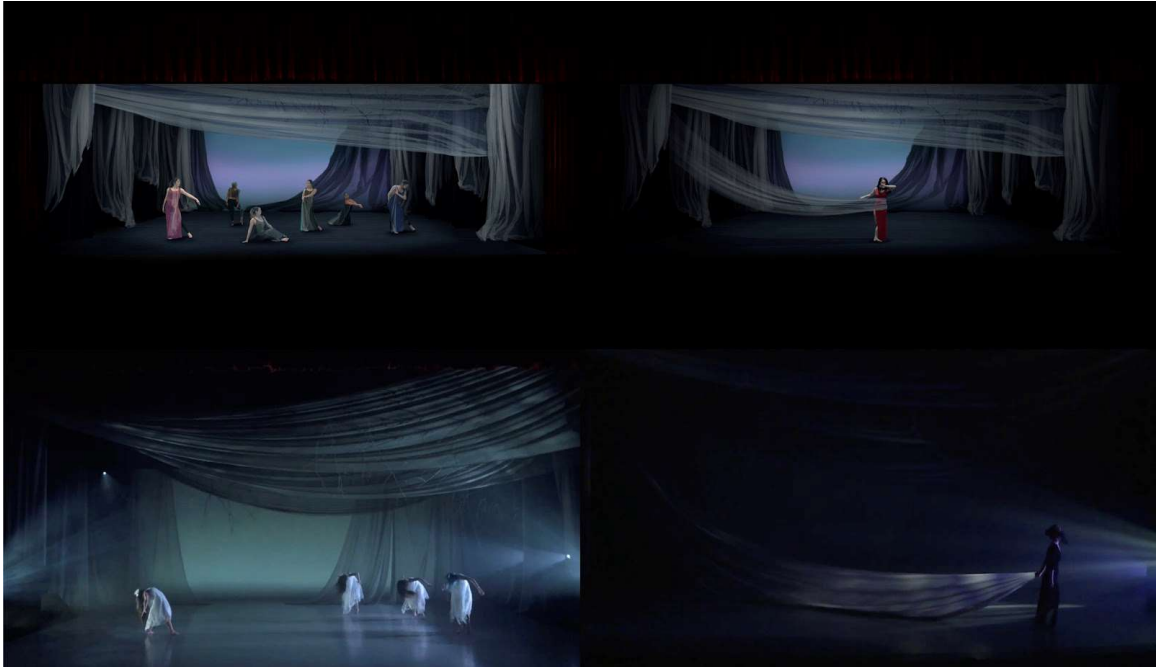
Knowing that the dancers would need to wear masks onstage during the whole performance, I proposed a stylized mask to match all the outfits for each section. After conducting research on the embellishment of face coverings in ancient Asian costumes, I developed the idea of covering half of the face with a veil. When I first saw the full design of the veil, it was beautiful and matched the different dresses very well. I

appreciated my costume designer's flexibility, and no matter what I asked her to change during tech week, she was always willing to meet my requests. For example, in the costume for the dancer playing the devil, the original mask design included lights in the eyes. This was an interesting idea, but it made it difficult for the dancer to see, and the lights did not read from a distance. Additional small adjustments were made to other costumes to help them read better on monitor. Luckily, we were always pleased with our changes.

My collaboration with the scenic designer was very exciting, and influenced by mutual trust and respect. More importantly, we were inspired by each other to talk about our process. The first time I saw the whole stage setting, I was amazed by how similar it was to his final drawing and how touched I was being able to see his design realized on stage in the midst of the pandemic. Using fabric for the set material was my initial idea. We were very careful when we were in the process of choosing the fabric to be sure we had the right color and weight to achieve the right look in the stage lighting. We had to ensure that those elements not only fit the storyline but also how we could work with the lighting and projection to enhance the appearance and performance of the fabric.

My scenic designer arranged an in-person meeting in the lighting lab with different colors of fabric to allow the lighting designer and projection designer to try different lighting effects on each of the fabrics to see which one was the ideal one. Below are comparison images of the scenic design drawings and photos during the performance





*Comparison of scenic design drawings and photos of performance scenic design. Design drawings: (first row: Alexander Shiryayev); Photos: (second row: Jonathan Hsu)*

to show how closely they matched. He allowed all of us to make the final decision on the material. It was another example of a successful collaboration. Having meetings regularly with my scenic designer was very helpful to keep both of us updated with any new ideas. Every time we had any thoughts on adjustments, we discussed them thoroughly and tried to keep the scenic design as close as possible to our vision to ensure there would be no need for big changes before building it.

During my early concept meetings and before the intensive dance rehearsals started, I began searching for music, initially being drawn to cello and percussion as the main instruments for my score. When thesis rehearsals began, I shifted some of my initial ideas to something new for the music collaboration. In experimenting with different kinds of music for the various sections in *Ghost Bride*, it was revealing to see how the dancers reacted in diverse ways to the different music. I remember that for quite some time, I had



difficulty finding music sources that were ideal. After many meetings, discussions, and reviews of my choreography with the sound designer, we found some materials that we both liked. However, it took a long time to edit, and we did not finalize the music until tech week.

Throughout the working process, I was determined to keep the door open to newly discovered opportunities and kept coming up with new thoughts for each section for *Ghost Bride*. For example, I conceived the idea of recording the dancers whispering. I asked my sound designer to record, and then play, a low volume track of the dancers' speaking voices to produce a more eerie feeling during one of the dance sections. The content of the whispering is very personal for me; it links how cultural aspects have impacted on my personal life such as what we cannot hear when people say things about us behind our backs. I asked dancers to think of different kinds of behavior that gossips might employ such as spreading rumors and questioning others' behavior. The dancers brought up their own interpretation of how to present the phrases through their tone of voice. This improvisational response was edited by the sound designer later and worked well in the performance, adding a connection to the living world. This sound design collaboration with my dancers brought the open-hearted cast even closer, as the whispers of personal stories and feelings were revealed. Through this theatrical device, the performers expanded their participation in the project beyond the dancing.

Of course, there were many challenges and adjustments along the way. It was not easy to envision the entire production while simultaneously focusing on the choreography. I needed to constantly remind myself of the big picture to keep me on the right path. And it was difficult to accept not having an audience in the theater to see the

impressive effect in person. However, the final presentation accomplished my goal and justified all of our hard work. As the director and performer in such an inspiring event in real space, I enjoyed every second of the performance. My opportunity to direct a team of professionals and incorporating their expertise into the dance performance was the richest, most memorable and most enjoyable learning experience, and always will be invaluable to me. Through all phases of this research project on *Ghost Bride*, I discovered new potential in myself. I have become more confident and passionate about creating art, and I look forward to my next challenge.

## **Chapter 8: Dancer Selection, Preparation and Rehearsals**

In this chapter, I describe my process for selecting my cast of dancers, the rehearsal process, and some of the challenges associated with scheduling and social distancing.

### **Selection of Dancers and Virtual Preparation**

My initial plan was for a diverse cast so I could present the concept that the underlying story had a universal message. However, the story I ultimately chose required dancers of a similar appearance and proficiency, as my plans for movement included much symmetry. I selected an all-Asian-American cast composed of dancers I had worked with before and in whom I had a high degree of confidence in their enthusiasm and continued engagement throughout all planning and preparation phases. I presented my concept to my dancers to ensure it resonated with them, and then frequently refreshed the meaning of the story and movements to reinforce their commitment and keep them on the same wavelength throughout the whole process. One of the motivating factors for my four Asian-American dancers was the opportunity for them to learn more Chinese culture and history through our planning and preparation.

I began working with my dancers in the theater in the spring of 2020. We were able to hold four rehearsals in March before COVID-19 case numbers caused the university to cancel all on-campus activities, at which time we needed to resort to virtual dance training for a period of four months.

### **Dance Rehearsals**

While virtual preparations were useful, in-person rehearsals in the dance studio were essential to achieve proper timing and precise movement of the dancers. After

obtaining permission from the university in August 2020, we prepared to return to the studio in mid-August for in-person rehearsals. At this time, I needed an approach to ensure my dancers would stay the course throughout the risks, difficulties and inconveniences associated with the pandemic. I discovered the biggest requirement for this production would be flexibility in dealing with any unforeseen situation. For example, scheduling regular rehearsals to coordinate with dancers' schedules was difficult since they had other personal responsibilities, with some living many miles from campus. I also needed to reinforce the need for self-discipline to limit outside exposure. I counselled dancers on the need for safety precautions at all times, considering the possibility that one positive case of infection could terminate the entire production.

COVID-19 presented many other challenges requiring flexibility. In spite of the precautions, some of my dancers were reluctant to return to campus when permission was granted. One dancer was concerned about virus exposure that she might carry home to her family. Another dancer had a roommate who had potentially been exposed to the virus, and consequently missed one rehearsal due to concern she could transmit the virus among the team. These situations were potentially problematic and required careful consideration.

Pandemic cases began to climb again in the early fall and as the performance dates approached, local governments considered stricter controls on movement and gatherings. We seemed to be in a race against time and circumstance to complete the performance. Fortunately for us, the local county government ordered greater restrictions to take effect the week after our performance dates. Throughout the entire process, I didn't lose any dancers directly to the risk, but I did lose my featured performer. As one

of the many students who had moved back home after the university shut down in-person classes, she found it necessary to drop out of our project just before we returned to campus for in-person rehearsals. I needed to encourage and motivate my dancers at all times, and to compensate them for their travel expenses to get to campus. I also needed to deal with the risk that dancers might decide to find a job if the semester was cancelled, which would likely impact scheduling and time availability.

The loss of the featured dancer required a re-organization of the choreography. It also created the need for me to step into the performance as a performer instead of simply choreographing and directing, as it was too late in the process to recruit, train and rehearse a new dancer. As a result, I needed to both direct and perform in each rehearsal. This complication resulted in delays in making some changes since I could not watch sections of the rehearsals while dancing and needed to decide on changes when studying rehearsal video at a later time away from the theater.

I had a specific goal for every rehearsal and recorded each one, reviewing them afterward and taking notes for the next rehearsal. Time management was very important, and I could not waste any valuable rehearsal time. The program's safety protocol required sanitization of the rehearsal space, preventing occupancy for 30 minutes before the next dancers could enter. With available space being limited and with reservations required well in advance, there were occasional challenges in obtaining sufficient rehearsal space to explore new ideas.

The COVID-19 risk led to a significant level of anxiety on my part. Fortunately, all dancers and designers were careful in protecting themselves and we had no known exposure. One of the major reasons for the success of this project was the great

relationship I had with my dancers. I was overwhelmed by the amount of heart and love they had for this production. One of my dancers commented that in her view “everybody on this cast had a goal, had a mission”.

As with any production, ours was a work in progress. With the benefit of notes from my thesis committee and dance professors, I made frequent adjustments in the presentation during rehearsals, adding new movements and making adjustments or dropping others.

At times I was very specific on particular movements, feelings, stories, or maybe even just a look. During rehearsals with my dancers, I conveyed the essence of Classical Chinese movement and fundamentals such as the importance of breath in movement. I focused on the connection between body movements and mental commitment. I used exaggerating movements mixed with a concentration on developing flexibility, drive, and articulation of the simplest of gestures as in finger placement, space between fingers, hands against the elbow and the hip, etc. My thinking was that I wanted that level of movement quality so my audience would get a better feel for the story.

I engaged my dancers in the choreographic process. For example, I gave my solo dancer free reign to develop her character’s movements and to use her impressive costume in ways she interpreted to match the character. To refine this concept even further, I thought about the many emotions including sadness, fear, sympathy, frustration, and loneliness associated with increasingly bad news from the pandemic and the challenge of working toward a stage production. I decided I would invite the emotions of my dancers. I would not merely ask my dancers to work toward my vision but I wanted their individual story to be part of the overall narrative. I worked to gain the trust of my

dancers and then at one point, we gathered together to identify each dancer in the room. I asked each dancer “Who are you?” for example: a poor soul, a happy soul, an angry soul, a lonely soul, an enthusiastic soul, etc. I wanted them to present who they were and what they wanted to express. My intention was to identify a personal role for each of them in the different sections and then adapt the choreography to their expressed identities. In this way, I harnessed their emotional energy and mental and physical essence to integrate their personal stories.

I am convinced the permission to express individuality and creativity on the part of the performers resulted in a better performance. Each dancer was able to integrate her identity and to develop her own movements in response to her feelings and emotions about the character and the story. In a sense, this part of the choreography consisted of solos derived from improvisations. Giving them their own realm within a solo enhanced the meaning for all the dancers, and potentially for all the viewers who related to their individual expressions. For some, it was an opportunity to transform their negative emotions into the positive outcome of the production.

Each rehearsal would need to be as efficient as possible, since rehearsal time was severely limited. My process would push dancers to test their limits to strengthen them, and since I placed special attention on detail, there could only be so many ‘do-overs’. We needed to get it right the first time as much as we could.

Rehearsals within the studio spaces in accordance with social distancing requirements were successful. All dancers were tested prior to starting studio rehearsals and no dancers exhibited symptoms at any time during rehearsals, tech week or the performances.

## **Performing with Masks**

Dancing together as a team was stimulating but was not without its challenges. We soon learned that dancing in masks was more uncomfortable than just walking. During the rehearsal period, I needed to give explanations and demonstrations, and finally participate in the dancing styles. It was difficult to breathe and also difficult to communicate, especially while social distancing. It was a lot to ask of our bodies to respond to.

Unexpectedly, the special costume masks we needed to wear were an even greater challenge because the mask fabric had a layer of gauze on the outside of the mask for the performance, making it thicker than a regular mask and more difficult to breathe. We all needed more volume when speaking during rehearsals, which was tiring, as well as better enunciation. It was also challenging to portray emotions in masks. This required us to rely more on the movement to describe an emotion since facial expression was no longer a factor.

However, during the last month before the performances, the dancers discovered how powerful and resilient their bodies could be. After many rehearsals, we found we could adapt to dancing at performance level while wearing the costume masks by focusing on the frequency of breathing. We experienced an additional illuminating discovery. The mask seemed to act as a protector, allowing more freedom to express emotion through more expressive body movements.



## Chapter 9: Experiencing *Ghost Bride*

In this chapter, I describe the experience of *Ghost Bride* performances as a director, choreographer and dancer. I also describe the experience from the eyes of the dancers, technical team, and audience.

*Ghost Bride* featured extraordinary scenic, lighting, sound, costuming and projection to depict the overpowering spell and eternal pain of unwanted destiny.

The *Ghost Bride* story reflects the historical enlistment of women, expected to consent to bind themselves to a spiritual entity, and often too weak to resist powerful tradition or overcome desperation. My interpretation of *Ghost Bride* threw off the shackles of domination by demonstrating the transformation of womanhood toward self-determination.

Throughout the presentation, I felt the resonance of my personal journey to the evolution of women's rights for self-determination. The performance illustrates a struggle between two dimensions, similar to the struggle of women for legal, political and economic equality throughout time, while still being respectful of their heritage.

*[All chapter 9 photos below: Jonathan Hsu]*



*Ghost Bride* opens with a dark, purplish black stage, wispy smoke, clouds, and shadows. Bare tree branches add to an eerie feeling of foreboding and there is intermittent darkness. Whispers of a cabal of watchers out of earshot share *The Decision*. Female bodies are elegant but seem vulnerable – things are unsettled, unsafe. Whimsical music conveys the conflicted mood of the event – a party to meet the mother of the dead. Now light bells and a sense of floating in grey sky and darker grey water.

Young women move in slow motion, carrying candles, presenting sadness, seeking to connect to those lost. It is the time and place for a *Memorial for the Deceased One*. Blackness, then red fire, green smoke, all manifested from power underground. Repetitive, crashing sounds portend violence, doom.



Agonized souls shake violently as if shocked, fearful, sharing futility. *The Hell* compels those condemned to *Go Through That Door* where judgment awaits.



Ominous music envelops the interplay of a contrasted duo as they revolve, coming together, pushing apart. Seemingly cause and effect, black and white, good and bad.

Everything has a side and another, sometimes aligned but sometimes conflicted, sometimes clouded. Opposing perspectives fueled by unbalanced powers, merging worlds, unnatural influence ... all combine to defeat reason when *Facing the Nether World*.



Blue light, white bodies with ghost-like movement, walking on toes as if they cannot fully touch the earth – a dream, imagination or ghost inviting guests. *I Saw Him* ... one no longer alive. One sight, one amorphous touch, and now haunted by the prospects of relinquishing presence, crossing over, accepting untimely fate.

A sole red presence, shrouded in dark purple, her movement expressing pain and desperation. *Still Here but not Here*, her spirit separates, cannot see the next step, yet keeps fighting the decisions that assign lives to savage deaths. The devil passes but cannot see her ... cannot see her yet.



Under veils of white and grey, passed judgments from hell, light-streaked *Sensual Spirits* descend on newly pure, unburdened, naked souls ready to be reborn, to absorb a new chance.



One is chosen, committed, feeling the pressure, the desperation. Entangled in the long, twisted web of imposed commitment, bound by her destiny. Facing the worst, she fights against the journey and falls, marked. Yet she fights again, driven by the light, by the chance. Women own this vulnerability, but also the *Veiled Ambition* with the emotional power to fight harder no matter what, changing desperation to hope and weakness to strength.



At the time I began considering a thesis dance concept, I had been having difficulty in dealing with the loss of my Dad. When I was introduced to the ghost bride story, I recognized the connection with my loss in the narrative's description of an alternate dimension and I felt compelled to explore the choreographic possibilities. As I thought more about the story, I saw mental images of movements to tell the ghost bride story but also as a means to tell my story. I needed to believe my Dad was not really gone but just on a journey to a better place. The ghost souls segment in the performance depicted their path to rebirth and it helped me have faith that my Dad has a second chance. Working the Ghost Bride project helped me change my feelings about my loss to more of a celebration.



## **Appendix A: Post-Performance Perspectives**

By all known accounts, the *Ghost Bride* performances were well received. The production was a remarkable, and surprisingly collaborative working experience. I could not be more satisfied with how this project turned out. After the project finished, I polled my dancers and without exception, they all responded with positive views regarding the planning, preparation and performance processes, despite the frustration with COVID-19. Their comments, in their own words below, are grouped into four categories:

### **Method:**

- Freedom to explore the more creative side of dance and how they walked away with increased body awareness.
- Never thought I could not explore my individuality.
- Loved the fact that it is a combination of the different styles I have trained in.
- Results in a stronger emphasis of the emotion.
- Took value in my past and I think it was really important to the work.
- Attention to the smallest of details, the focus on articulation and the amount of concentration placed in just the simplest of gesture and in their meaning.
- Pushed dancers to near their limits.

### **Personal Growth:**

- Learned about so many different ways to move.
- Learned breathing techniques and transitions of Classical Chinese dance.
- Helped me understand contraction with the upper body and the internal energy involved in dance.

- Challenged to do more to bring something different to the movement
- The dance made me happy and mentally and physically stronger.
- The synergy gave me so much strength.
- Made me feel bold and fierce.
- Made me feel more strength in my hands and feet.
- Became a stronger person in the dance through this production.
- I felt like a whole different person and just a lot more confident.

### **Choreography:**

- Choreography was fresh, interesting, and exciting and unlike any piece I have ever danced.
- Felt as though the choreographed was specifically chosen for my body and allowed me to explore my personal style.
- Could portray different emotions ... fear, hopeful, elegance.
- The variety of refined and stronger movements and their different interpretations showed the beauty of women but also their power and strength.
- The choreography was a beautiful mix of Chinese and modern dance.
- Enjoyed incorporating the Chinese movements such as flex duck feet, Chinese walks, and the 3-body curve.
- The choreography helped to bridge the gap as a Chinese-American because of the combination of the East-West dance styles and provided more knowledge of Chinese cultural elements such as the breath and opposition of movement before the next action.

**Overall Experience:**

- Extremely exciting to witness the production and how each element enhanced the performance.
- Being able to see our pieces come together in such a short time was so powerful and inspiring.
- Excited about the relationship of respect and challenging each other artistically. It felt like a family.
- Everyone in the space had a goal and a mission ... it was mentally and physically powerful.
- Felt great to be in the studio again. Realized how much I missed dancing after returning to the studio.
- Zoom cannot compare to in person training.
- Could feel the energy bounce off of each other.
- The production was a stress reliever under the Covid-19 situation.
- It gave me a safe place where I could associate with dance only and relieve myself of other burdens.

## Notes

1. Laura L. Adams, *Globalization and the Arts* (Oxford, England, 2007).
2. Ben Hu et al 2020, “Characteristics of SARS-CoV-2 and COVID-19,” *Nature Reviews Microbiology*, (October 6, 2020).
3. Li Chang, Shih-Ming and Lynn E. Frederiksen. *Chinese Dance – In the Vast Land and Beyond*. (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, Middletown, 2016), 117. Chinese instructors in modern dance companies and educational exchange programs have successfully presented Chinese dance forms through Western dance artists in other countries. Their perspectives on their level of success in merging Chinese dance and modern dance forms have provided useful perspective for this thesis. Yunyu Wang values her Asian roots for inspiration and as means to create unique movement as a choreographer.
4. Ibid., 143. Jin-Wen Yu has admitted struggling at times with the challenge of teaching Chinese dance movement to Western dancers because of their lack of understanding of the Chinese artistic culture. He gives the example of using the edge of the stage to portray the perception of travel to somewhere else. Chinese audiences understand and help create the reality. Western audiences do not associate with the culture or the aesthetics but instead want to see the literal presentation.
5. Guiyuan Wang. “Balance of Grace and Strength: Chinese Folk Dancing in South Louisiana.” *Folklife in Louisiana*, (Louisiana Division of the Arts, Baton Rouge, LA, 2009).
6. Xinhua. *China Issues Guidelines to Preserve Traditional Culture* (January 26, 2017).
7. Li Chang, *Chinese Dance – In the Vast Land and Beyond*, 87.
8. Ibid., 140. I could relate completely to this perspective as my personal experiences and memories were a major motivation for my thesis and an inspiration for my choreography.
9. Ibid., 97.
10. Songling Pu. *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio, 1640-1715*. Herbert A. Giles, Translator. (London 1880) 1740, 20. The Ghost Bride practice is believed to date back at least 3,000 years. Originally, the practice involved the marriage of a single deceased man and a single deceased woman. In those cases, the bones of the dead woman to be the bride were removed from her burial site and mixed with the bones of the dead man to be the husband. However, recent ghost brides have been living women married to a deceased man who did not have a wife. In China, most cases are found in Shanxi, Shaanxi and Henan provinces but the custom is also found in South East Asia.

11. Dan Conway. Personal communication. Director of Graduate Studies at UMD School of Theater, Dance and Performance Studies (TDPS), (August 20, 2020), 26.
12. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, (2019), 28.

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